

Changing Japanese Society and Women

著者名(英)	Satomi Ohgata
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Changing Japanese Society and Women*

OHGATA Satomi

1. The low position of women in Japanese society owing to male-dominated workplace

After World War II, the Japanese economy developed, and people's standards of living rose; however, women's position in society continued to be low. We now notice data that proves this fact. According to the Human Development Report from UNDP 2007/8, Japan ranks eighth in the world in terms of the HDI (Human Development Index). However, if we look at the GEM (Gender Empowerment Measure) ranking, Japan will stand fifty-fourth in the world¹. What is the reason behind this? We can see that this fact is closely connected with the employment system in Japan, which is very male dominated. Usually, the Japanese workplace extracts long durations of overtime work from its employees almost every day and does not offer any compensation for family responsibilities. As a result, if the worker is unable to carry out overtime work or is unwilling to go on an official trip to another city, she/he will be categorized as a lower class worker and will not be considered for promotion. In Japan, it is generally very common for women to undertake almost all the household responsibilities

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without help; therefore, many women are forced to become lower class workers with salaries that are far lesser than those of men. The average income of the Japanese working woman is only 50% of the man's average income², because many women quit their jobs when they get married or when they wish to start a family. In case they choose to continue working, many of them may start working part-time or become temporary staff. Due to this situation, the number of women occupying a managerial position is very small. The number of female managers in Japan is a mere 10.4%, and this figure is very small when compared to that of the United States, where this number has already reached 40%³.

According to a study undertaken by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare in 2007, which targeted around 7000 private companies in Japan having less than 30 employees, 36.9% of the companies stated that there was no plan to hire female employees⁴. It is not only difficult for women to assume managerial roles, but their employment entails other difficulties as well. Further, it is very common to see men in charge of the main work and women in charge of subordinate work. Therefore, until recently, it was customary to see female workers voluntarily clean the office before official work hours, prepare tea, and make photocopies for other employees; this scene is particularly prevalent in small local companies. It can be said that in Japan, the gender gap is relatively bigger than the class gap.

2. Sacrifice of family lives by male-dominated working systems

It is clear that male-dominated workplaces have already negatively influenced family lives of the Japanese. In Japan, it is still so common

for women to quit work on getting married or on having a child that the percentage of working women in their late 20s and 30s is low. However, after their children are old enough, many mothers resume their jobs as part-time workers. A nationwide survey revealed that the percentage of couples wherein the wife and husband are both working when they have a child attending preschool is 32.8% in Japan and only 28.8% in Tokyo. At present, Japanese mothers quit their jobs due to the following reasons: 36.1% due to marriage, 39.9% due to childbirth, and 8.8% due to childcare⁵.

To understand the reasons for such a situation, it is important to consider the fact that Japanese husbands generally have very little commitment toward their household responsibilities. According to research, in Japanese families that include children below six years of age, the husbands work for around nine hours on an average; on the other hand, they do household chores for only ten minutes and spend time with their children for around sixteen minutes⁶. Since Japanese society is primarily composed of nuclear families that do not have housemaids, the husbands do not share household chores; hence, the wives are compelled to manage all household tasks.

Even though the wives are working, they usually undertake almost all household responsibilities and chores. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that mothers face considerable stress while taking care of their children; quite a few of them suffer from mental diseases. In addition, according to the results of the cooperative research conducted by the Japan Family Planning Association and the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare in 2004, about 32% of the couples in Japan do not have sex more than once a month without special reason.

Moreover, the number of couples who do not have sex more than once in a year is 20%. Maybe these figures show a difficulty which is faced by many couples to maintain good mutual relationships in their busy daily lives. In addition, even though quite a few husbands keep other women as mistresses, their wives cannot ask for a divorce. Since the women's lives depend on their husbands, they would face poverty if their husbands divorced them.

3. Factors responsible for the increase in the population of the elderly and the decrease in the population of children

At present, Japan is experiencing the development of the most rapid aging society. In 2007, the average life span of a Japanese male was 79.19 years and that of a Japanese female was 85.99 years. Therefore, Japan is well known in the world for its longest average life span; it became the country that had the highest percentage of elderly people in the world. At present, the percentage of people in Japan who are above 65 years of age is 22%. On the other hand, the percentage of people who are above 65 years of age is 18.8% in Germany, 16.6% in France, 16% in the UK, and 12.3% in the United States . There are several factors responsible for the decrease in the number of children in Japan. One of the reasons is the tendency to postpone marriage or not marry at all. Based on data obtained from a nationwide study, in the 1960s, the average age for the first marriage was 24.4 years for females and 27.2 years for males. However, in 2007, this figure changed to 28.2 years for females and 30.0 years for males⁸. The tendency to postpone marriage is found to be more remarkable particularly in Tokyo, where the average marriageable age for the first marriage is

29.3 years for females and 31.3 years for males⁹.

Some people consider the women who postpone their marriages as the cause for the late marriageable age. Actually, the women do not only cause the problem but the men also committed. 5.82% females and 12.57% males do not marry at all in their entire life¹⁰. According to a book by Junko Sakai¹¹, women who are over 30 years old, are still unmarried, and do not have children are called “*make inu*” (which means a cowardly little dog). Sakai, who also admits to being a “*make inu*” herself, says that there are many complications on the men's part as well. For example, many old men wish to marry younger women but do not want a woman with higher educational qualifications than them. In addition, there are men who do not want to undertake any responsibilities, that is, they do not want to marry. Moreover, there are the “*otaku*,” who are not interested in real women but are satisfied with women who appear in animations or their imaginations¹². Therefore, it is not easy for women over 30 years of age to seek marriage partners.

Other factors responsible for the decrease in the number of children include couples who do not wish to have children at all or wish to have only one child. This tendency is partly caused by the fact that raising a child is a big burden on the mother, and provision of education is also considerably expensive. The average educational costs spent on a child from high school until university in Japan is about 10,446,000 yen; in other words, it is around 54.3% of the household income of the families whose income is between two million and four million yen¹³.

In addition, many people from the current young generation are

unable to marry owing to economic limitations. This situation was brought about by the Japanese economic recession and the deregulation of the labor employment system, which resulted in the instability of the non-regular worker's income. At present, the number of working people in Japan whose income is lower than two million amounts to ten million. The average income of 20% of the workers belonging to the lowest social class in Japan is 1,290,000 yen, and the people whose income is under two million yen is about 18.9%¹⁴.

The national poverty rate¹⁵ of Japan in 2001 was 17.0%; in terms of the figure based on the householder's age, householder in the over 70 age group had a poverty rate of 25.3%. In addition, householder in the under 29 age group held the highest poverty rate (25.9%). If we look at the 1995 data, the poverty rate of the householder under 29 years of age was 20.7%. Therefore, this implies that poverty among the younger generation is increasing¹⁶.

Japan has been famous for its high national savings rates. At present, owing to the decrease in income, increase in the number of part-time workers, and increase in jobless households, etc., the national savings rate has also declined. This is evident in the fact that this rate had dropped from 11.4% in 1991 to 3.2% in 2006. Moreover, 23.8% of entire households and 41.4% of single households do not have savings¹⁷.

4. The woman's responsibility of elderly care

Now, let us examine the problem of elderly care. Unlike other developed countries, where many foreign workers are hired to take care of the elderly at home, the Japanese government has not yet

allowed foreign workers in untrained fields of employment. Therefore, the elderly in Japanese families are looked after by their family members, usually the wife, daughter-in-law, or daughter.

In Japan, quite a few people still insist that elderly care has to be carried out by the own respective families. However, apart from the decrease in the population rate of children, the lifespan of the elderly is increasing due to medical and scientific advancement. Further, if the elderly suffer from diseases that impair recognition abilities, the caretakers may be faced with a variety of strange unpredictable behaviors and habits; for example, the old person may go out in the middle of the night or blame the caretaker of abuse.

Since it is evident that the sole dependence of the elderly on their family members entails its own difficulties, the Japanese government has already launched a new national elder care insurance policy system in 2000. Nevertheless, the potential employees in this system are expected to be women workers with low wages. The nursing workers in certain nursing homes are called “home-helpers.” The number of female home-helpers is 94.3% and that of male home-helpers is only 5.7%¹⁸. Since those elderly persons who are to be taken care of are mostly women and those workers who take care of the elderly are also mostly women, so the elderly care problem is called a female problem.

Why are there such few male home-helpers? The reason for this is that the profile of a home-helper falls under the category of part-time jobs, which implies that salaries are so substandard that those who take up this job are generally housewives, who have to support their families. Moreover, the receivers of this elder care insurance system have to pay a part of the nursing care costs; hence, if the family is

not able to afford this, it can rarely avail of this service. Therefore, the phrase “*kaigo jigoku*,” which translates as “nursing care hell,” is often used by the Japanese to indicate the difficulties and problems faced by families in elderly care. This sometimes results in tragic cases like murder. In many cases, it is the son who commits the murder of his parent(s), as they are no longer able to bear the responsibilities of elderly care owing to dismal economic conditions and the resultant mental stress.

5. The emergence of “*kakusa syakai*” (a gap-widening society)

For a long time, Japan had been regarded as an economically equal society. However, Japan has recently started becoming a “*kakusa syakai*” (a gap-widening society) or “*hubyoudou syakai*” (an unequal society), where the gap between the rich and the poor has become more defined. Fundamentally, Japan offers health insurance and pension policies to all without any exception. However, nowadays, many people are unable to afford the monthly insurance premium owing to an insufficient income. As a result, about 40% of the members of the national insurance system—an insurance system for self-employed business owners and part-time workers—cannot pay their insurance premium. In particular, half of the population belonging to the younger generation below 29 years of age do not pay premium. The number of those members of the national insurance system who cannot afford to pay their insurance premium reached 19% in 2005¹⁹. This implies that they do not fall under the national social security network. A society that cannot offer social security to non-permanent workers can make them sink to the bottom like chutes. Therefore, Japanese society is now often called “*suberidais*

yakai,”²⁰ that is, a chutes society.

This condition was partly caused by the deregulation of the Japanese Worker Dispatch Law, particularly when the law was modified to allow dispatching workers to all fields since 2004. According to this law, companies can hire workers as and when they need, albeit only for one day or one week. In other words, workers are treated merely like commodities, which can be ordered according to the company's requirements without any costs that would have to be incurred on full-time workers. Those persons who can only acquire jobs on a short-term basis are unable to stabilize their lives, and they are now called the “*working poor*.” Under these conditions, now coming appear those who are called “*Roppongi Hill's Zoku*” , those who are rich and living in *Roppongi Hill's* and that area. Because the social security system does not function, many non-permanent workers suddenly lost their jobs and become homeless. Those people who cannot pay their house rent are evicted from their apartments and are forced to stay in internet cafes, which are equipped with showers and are charged at 1000 yen per night. They are so-called “*Net Cafe Nanmin*” , or Refugee in Internet Cafes.

According to research by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), Japan ranks second highest in terms of the national poverty rate among developed countries, after the United States. Many books have been published in Japan with titles containing words such as “*kakusa-syakai*” (a gap-widening society), “*hubyoudou syakai*” (an unequal society), “*syotoku kakusa*” (income gap)” , etc. Some scholars argue that the income gap in Japan can be attributed to the increase in the number of older workers to some

extent; there are no big income gaps visible in the United States or the U.K.²¹ Nevertheless, at least most data reveal that the gapwidening pace in Japan is more than that in the U.K., and the effect of the correction of the gap is under the U.S.

Since the act of begging is considered a crime, there are fewer beggars in Japan. However, at present, the number of homeless is expected to be around 25,000 to 50,000. This number is still small compared to the 4 million homeless people in the United States. On the whole, this condition is undergoing a big social change in Japan.

6. The decline of the local economies, agricultural sector, and middle and small companies

In the process of Japan's transformation into a class-structured society, the economic gap between big cities and local areas have also become clearer. The economies of many local areas are declining; the agricultural sector has already been on the decline since a long time. Relative to the 1960s, the total number of farmers has decreased drastically from 26.6% to 4% of the total workers across all sectors. In addition, the farmers in Japan are also very old. According to data released by a government research institution, the number of farmers who are above 70 years of age is 46.8%²². In other words, nearly half of the farmer population is above 70 years of age. Therefore, it is inevitable that the number of farmers will further decrease in the near future.

The local areas of Japan consisted of many middle and small-scale factories; however, since 1985, many factories have moved abroad, particularly to China and Southeast Asian countries, in pursuit of

cheaper workers; many factories faced a crisis in matters concerning the yen's appreciation. With the depression crisis, many middle and small companies that have so far survived in Japan are again facing difficulties; hence, they depend on hiring cheap migrant workers through various training schemes such as “*Gaikokujin Kensyusei/Jissyusei Seido*” (Industrial Training Program and Technical Internship Program). However, many trainees complain that instead of receiving proper training from these schemes they end up taking strenuous and a dangerous, untrained jobs. Moreover, if they suffer an injury at work, in many cases they are forced to return to their countries without proper medical treatment or economic compensation.

7. The need to re-examine the theories of “*Tate-syakai*” (a vertical society) and “*Amae-no Kouzou*” (structure of dependence)

From the abovementioned information about the transition of Japanese society in the past years, it is evident that the theories proposed so far on Japanese society, particularly “*Tate-syakai*” and “*Amae-no Kouzou*,” need to be re-examined.

First, let us focus on the theory of “*Tate-syakai*,” which was introduced by Nakane Chie in 1967; it argues that Japanese society is a society that lays too much stress on seniority. So far, the seniority system in workplaces and its lifelong employment have been considered symbols of “*Tate-syakai*” . However, nowadays, many companies have started implementing a performance-related pay system, and the concept of lifelong employment is no longer that common. The seniority in the “*Ie*” (family) has also considerably changed. Since most fathers are rarely at home and do not undertake proper

responsibilities to raise their children, their position in family has also fallen.

Next, let us examine the arguments presented by the “*Amae-no Kouzou*” theory. In 1971, Doi Kenro introduced a new term, “*Amae-no Kouzou*,” to illustrate the features of Japanese society. According to Doi, Japanese society has *Amae-no Kouzo* because the Japanese are allowed to depend on their mothers from childhood unlike the pattern observed in the United States. Further, he made the existence on term “*Amae*” in Japanese lexicon as the strong ground for the existence of “*Amae-no Kouzou*” in Japan²⁴. Nevertheless, does “*Amae-no Kouzou*” really exist in Japan? According to me, it appears to be the reverse. Although the term “*Amae*” exists in Japanese lexicon, the word “*Amae*” is frequently used in the term “*Amaeruna*” that mean “do not depend on the other people and do not make an excuse.” However, when compared to Indonesian society, the children in Japan are raised in a stricter and more disciplined environment.

8. Avoidance of dependence in Japanese society

In Japan, children are taught to eat by themselves from the time they are two years old; some mothers do not help them by feeding them either. At the same time, children are taught to dress up on their own. If they try to depend on someone else or refuse to be disciplined, punishment is meted out to them. Such punishment is called “*Oshioki*,” and crying children are occasionally expelled from their houses for a while. This is the way that children are raised at home. These conditions are more or less similar in school as well; they are not supposed to be dependent on others. If they do not abide by

the school rules, they receive suitable sanctions.

For example, if a child forgets to carry his/her swimming cap or her/his health check card, he/she is not allowed to swim that day. In case a child forgets to bring a textbook, he/she cannot ask a friend to share her/his textbook. In other words, the Japanese school education system teaches children the importance of “*Jiko-sekinin*” (self-responsibilities) from childhood. It is possible that given these situations, Japanese society follows the rules of discipline and independence. Therefore, people do not depend on others at workplaces as well. Even if someone is sick, he/she is requested to work. Workers may not be able to give priority to dates or outings with their girl/boyfriends if they have to work overtime. Even if their children are unwell, they may not be able to take leave. In case someone takes many holidays, he/she will certainly be dismissed. Such a situation can render a worker jobless and homeless; however, the consequences of such actions are regarded as “*Jiko-sekinin*” .

9. Conclusions

As I have mentioned so far, the Japanese male-dominated workplace has led to the inferior position of women in society and, at the same time, affected their family lives. In addition, economic depression transformed Japanese society into a gap-widening society that does not allow dependence on others and propagates the idea of self-responsibility. There is no doubt that the gap between social classes is wider and clearer in Indonesian society than in Japanese society. However, I wish to point out that the gap-widening society entails many serious problems as family ties and community ties are already

weakened. Furthermore, the situation is becoming more serious due to a rapidly aging population and a historically low birth rate and every aspect of Japanese society is tightly structured with rules, wherein people are not provided enough freedom and dependence on others is strongly frowned upon.

- 1 http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_20072008_GEM.pdf
- 2 According to the data from the Japanese National Tax Agency, the men's income average is 5,420,000 yen and the women's average income is 2,710,000 yen in 2007. http://www.nta.go.jp/kohyo/press/press/2008/kyuyo_jittai/index.htm
- 3 Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the Statistics Bureau and the Director-General for Policy Planning (Statistical Standards), Labour Force Survey, <http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/roudou/index.htm>
- 4 Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, *Heisei 18 nendo Jyouseikoyoukanri Kihonchousa* (厚生労働省「平成18年度女性雇用管理基本調査」). <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/houdou/2007/08/h0809-1/index.html>
- 5 *The Tokyo Metropolitan Government, April, 2005, Houdou Happyou Shiryou, 2nd Chapter, Tokyouno Kodomoto Kateiwo meguru jyoukyou* (「東京都庁 2005年4月報道発表資料 第2章 東京の子どもと家庭をめぐる状況」) <http://www.metro.tokyo.jp/INET/KEIKAKU/2005/04/70f4q118.htm>
- 6 Fujita Chie, ed., *The World data map of Gender, Ootsuki Syoten*, 2004, pp.8-9. (藤田千枝編／菅原由美子＋鈴木有子著『くらべてわかる世界地図3－ジェンダーの世界地図』大月書店), and Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, *the Statistics Bureau and the Director-General for Policy Planning* (Statistical Standards), *Syakaiseikatsu Kihon Chosa* (『社会生活基本調査』).
- 7 *White Paper of Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare in 2006, 2005-2006 Kaigai Jousei Houkoku, -Tokusyu : Syogaikokuni Okeru Koureisya Koyou Taisaku* (厚生労働省白書2006年「2005～2006年 海外情勢報告 一特集 諸外国における高齢者雇用対策」) <http://www.hakusyo.mhlw.go.jp/>
- 8 Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, the Statistics Bureau and the Director-General for Policy Planning (Statistical Standards), *Jinkou Doutai Toukei* (厚生労働省大臣官房統計情報部「人口動態統計」) <http://www.ipss.go.jp/shoushika/seisaku/html/>

- 9 The Tokyo Metropolitan Government, *Tokyoto Jinkou Doutai Toukei Nempouno Aramashi* (東京都人口動態統計年報(確定数)のあらまし)
<http://www.metro.tokyo.jp/>
- 10 Cabinet Office, *Heisei 17 Nendo Kokumin Seikatsu Hakusyo* (『平成17年度版国民生活白書』) <http://www5.cao.go.jp/seikatsu/whitepaper/>
- 11 Sakai, Junko, *Make Inu-no Tooboe* (『負け犬の遠吠え』), Kodansya, 2003.
It is said that this book succeeded to illustrate the real feeling of the Japanese women in their 20-30's, and this book got several prizes, such as “*Koudansya Essay Prize*” and “*Fujin Kouron Bungei Prize*”. And Mariko Hayashi prized that this book will be the first class literature to study about the Japanese women in 2000's in coming 50 years or 100 years. The term of “*Make Inu*” was selected as one of the populer words of 2004.
- 12 Ibid., pp.177-189.
- 13 National Life Finance Cooperation, Sougou Kenkyujo, *Kyouikuhi Hutanno Jittai chousa*, 2007 (国民生活金融公庫総合研究所「教育費負担の実態調査(勤労者世帯)～アンケート結果の概要～」2007年) http://www.kokokin.go.jp/pfcj/pdf/kyouikuhi__chousa_k.pdf
- 14 Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, *Heisei 18 Nendo Kokumin Seikatsu Kisotuousano Gaiyou* (厚生労働省「平成18年度国民生活基礎調査の概況」)
<http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/saikin/hw/k-tyosa/k-tyosa06/index.html>
- 15 The poverty rate is counted basing on the difinition that those who get under 50 % of the income from the average income.
- 16 Tachibanaki Toshiaki, *Kakusa Syakai --- Naniga Mondai Nanoka*, Iwanami Syoten, 2006, p.70.(橘木俊詔『格差社会－何が問題なのか』岩波新書、2006年)
- 17 According to *Kakeino Kinyushisanni kansuru yoronchousa* which was announced at the 2nd November 2005, Kinyuu Kouhou Tyuou Iinkai, (金融広報中央委員会が2005年11月2日に発表した「家計の金融資産に関する世論調査」による。

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(*The data used in this article are a little different from those of Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the Statistics Bureau and the Director-General for Policy Planning (Statistical Standards) in the site,

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